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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000716

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS CONTINUE DESPITE WANING INTEREST

REF: TBILISI 0711

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Protests waned April 10-12 despite the expiration of the non-parliamentary opposition demand that President Saakashvili resign within 24 hours. On Friday, 5,000-8,000 protesters gathered in front of Parliament and then broke into three groups to block traffic and continue rallies: first, in front of the Public Broadcaster, second, in Avlabari near the Presidential residence and third, a group remaining in front of Parliament. Saturday followed the same pattern, although there were only 3,000-4,000 protesters involved. Nino Burjanadze called for a break for Orthodox Palm Sunday, but a group of 1,500-2,000 organized in front of Parliament and listened to speakers, including Burjanadze. Meanwhile, a number of non-parliamentary opposition leaders called for meetings with EU conflicts representative Peter Semneby to mediate the impasse. Semneby urged the non-parliamentary opposition to drop their demand that Saakashvili resign, but reported that the non-parliamentary opposition bickered amongst themselves, then simply repeated demands for Saakashvili's resignation. A minor scuffle occurred at roughly 23:00 Saturday evening in front of Parliament and police stopped buses, including one filled with embassy families, in order to limit access to the city. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Protests are scheduled to continue indefinitely, although many expect that the opposition will stop for the Orthodox Easter holiday. Disagreement among the non-parliamentary leadership is out in the open as to how to proceed, particularly as the public does not seem to support their goals. Lacking a clear leader, Levan Gachechiladze is considered to hold the most sway among the group. In spite of a diminished negotiating position, the non-parliamentary opposition remains wholly unwilling to engage in a serious dialogue. The Georgian public so far has been extremely tolerant concerning the protests but signs are emerging that this tolerance could soon end. A campaign of perpetual inconvenience does not appear to be a recipe for success and on the eve of Orthodox holy week, an already significantly discredited non-parliamentary opposition might find itself further marginalized. With fewer protestors on the streets, the greatest danger may come from an effort by the non-parliamentary opposition to provoke the government into a reaction that will energize the public. End Comment.

Protests Proceed as Planned, Numbers Wane, Crowd Makeup Shifts

¶3. (C) The number of protesters roughly dropped in half from Friday to Saturday and again to Sunday. (Embassy Note: Our observers estimate that roughly 5,000-8,000 protested on Friday, 3,000-4,000, protested on Saturday and 1,500-2,000 protested on Sunday. End Note.). While Monday might see more numbers in the street, the non-parliamentary opposition looks to have lost its best chance to fill Rustaveli avenue which would have been between Thursday April 9 and Sunday April 12. Observers noted the crowd makeup had shifted

significantly to being almost exclusively male (95%) and middle aged, interspersed with some younger males. Observers estimate that roughly one quarter of all the crowds were mere onlookers rather than active protesters. (Embassy Comment: On Saturday, the crowd at Parliament predominately was made up of "Burjanadze" supporters. Many were holding Burjanadze Qup of "Burjanadze" supporters. Many were holding Burjanadze flags and other pro-Burjanadze paraphernalia and had the distinct look of a "rent-a-crowd". End Comment.) The crowd was largely apathetic, at one point getting roundly chastised by a speaker for not paying attention and listening to her. The crowd broke into three parts both on Friday, and Saturday to block a major traffic circle in Avlabari near the Presidential residence and the street in front of the Public Broadcaster as well as Rustaveli Avenue in front of the Parliament.

14. (C) On Saturday, the group of 1,500 to 2,000 in front of the Public Broadcasters marched to Rustavi 2 TV and continued to protest there until they dispersed. The protesters had a more difficult time on Saturday blocking the traffic circle in Avlabari due to traffic. The Avlabari crowd of roughly 300 protesters proceeded to the presidential residence before breaking up and going home. Protests continued on Sunday in front of Parliament, despite calls on Saturday for a day of respite to honor Orthodox Palm Sunday. Embassy Observers said that many in the crowd were simply passing by rather than actively engaged in the protest. The makeup of the Sunday crowd was also almost exclusively male and middle-aged. Protests are scheduled to proceed uninterrupted until Saakashvili resigns.

Incidents Reported - Details Murky

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15. (C) A strange incident occurred on Saturday night at 2300 when a small group of maintenance workers approached the lingering crowd to clean up the substantial mess left by protesters, as requested by opposition leaders. A confrontation broke out with protesters who claimed the maintenance workers were undercover Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) agents. The MOIA spokeswoman later said the municipal street cleaners were verbally abused and attacked. In the ensuing confusion, a computer was stolen and part of the makeshift communications tent was damaged. Deputy Minister of Interior, Eka Zguladze immediately informed the Ambassador of the incident and the MOIA has provided video footage of the incident from security cameras outside of Parliament (although it is difficult to discern what happened). Zguladze said the MOIA will investigate the theft of a computer. Zguladze said that Burjanadze herself was screaming at her (Zguladze) about how smelly and dirty the site had become. According to Peter Semneby, who was present when the crew arrived, there was some jostling between Burjanadze supporters and the crew, but no major incident. Burjanadze was present at the moment of the incident. (Embassy Note: Burjanadze's presence was unusual because she has generally addressed the crowd from the stage, then left the protests before they finished at 9pm. End Note.). Apparently, Burjanadze launched another complaint with the MOIA, and was irate that police were not dispatched to the scene. Zguladze told the Ambassador that the MOIA faced a no win situation, you send the police and you are accused of provocation, you do not send the police and you are accused of negligent indifference.

16. (C) In a separate incident, on Saturday April 11, a busload of Embassy employees coming back to Tbilisi from sightseeing trip to Gori was stopped twice, albeit briefly, by patrol police before being allowed to continue. An EU diplomat reported a similar incident south of Tbilisi on Friday. Earlier on Friday, OSCE and EUMM monitors told Post that they had seen no evidence of vehicles being stopped or denied access to Tbilisi. Non-parliamentary opposition members have claimed a suppression campaign exists to prevent

people from outside Tbilisi's participation in the protests, but have been unable to provide any detailed information. The Ambassador immediately raised the issue with Zguladze and told her these actions threaten to undermine the very good work the police had done to this point. The Ambassador received a response from Zguladze that Minister of the Interior, Vano Merabishvili went through the roof when he heard of the traffic stops. Post will continue to closely monitor and follow up on any reports of intimidation or restrictions of freedom of movement. On the other hand, several sources told Poloff that non-parliamentary opposition members are offering 20 Lari (roughly USD 13), free lunch, and transportation to any person willing to come to Tbilisi and join the protests.

Semneby Spends His Easter in Tbilisi

¶7. (C) At the request of some non-parliamentary opposition members, EU conflicts representative Peter Semneby spent the weekend trying to facilitate dialogue between the protest leaders and the government. Semneby met with Irakli Alasania (Alliance for Georgia), Levan Gachechiladze, Eka Beselia (United Georgia - Okruashvili's party), and Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way) on the evening of Friday, April 10. Semneby found them to be subdued and felt that they recognized that they needed a way out of their self-inflicted predicament. He rejected their request for EU mediation and said the EU was willing to offer their good offices (and attendance at meetings) provided: both the government and the opposition agreed to the EU's involvement; the non-parliamentary opposition request that the GoG be involved in talks; and that the non-parliamentary opposition publicly state how and when the protest rallies would stop. Those present agreed to consider the proposal and respond to Semneby April 11. Semneby told the group that while gathering in front of Parliament and blocking Rustaveli avenue was a consequence of free assembly, setting up roving roadblocks around town and tying up traffic on major arteries was an escalation that should be avoided.

¶8. (C) On April 11 around midnight, Semneby alerted the Ambassador that the non-parliamentary opposition responded that they could not agree to his proposal and countered that they wanted to meet personally with Saakashvili to demand his resignation. Semneby said he could not play a role in such a proposal. Semneby was frustrated by the non-parliamentary antics, exacerbated by the fact they waited until late Saturday evening to get back to him with simply another ultimatum for Saakashvili. Nevertheless, Semneby met privately with Alasania on April 12 who explained to him that

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the non-parliamentary opposition was deeply divided and could only agree that they want to meet Saakashvili personally to demand his resignation. Semneby told Alasania that such an approach lacked seriousness. It was not dialogue. Semneby left for Brussels and will be in Ankara on April 14. He told Alasania that he would be open to returning but only on the condition that the non-parliamentary opposition "get its act together".

These Guys Just Don't Learn

¶9. (C) Highly respected Georgia Foundation for Strategic and International Studies President, Ambassador Alex Rondeli told us on April 10 that the non-parliamentary opposition had learned nothing since November 2007. Rondeli contrasted them with the GoG who he believed had learned some valuable lessons and were handling the protests well, so far. Rondeli, who did not absolve the GoG of past wrongdoing and current mistakes, said that the non-parliamentary opposition has failed to provide credible or constructive alternatives to the current government. Rondeli said that resorting to ultimatums and street protests was a course of action designed to fail. Surprisingly, even on Maestro TV

(considered strongly pro-opposition in its editorial policy), on a Saturday night call-in show was getting calls breaking about 70 percent to 30 percent in favor of ending the protests. Callers were decidedly not pleased with Saakashvili or his administration, but the overriding theme was that Georgians were tired of the protests. Caller after caller questioned the tactics, motivations, and ability of the non-parliamentary opposition to affect meaningful change.

(Embassy Comment: Maestro is seen almost exclusively in the Tbilisi area. Our FSN newswatcher was surprised by the negative response for the non-parliamentary opposition considering the average Maestro viewer is anti-GoG from Tbilisi. End Comment.).

TEFFT